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## MEANINGFUL AMBIGUITIES IN THE BOOK OF QOHELETH

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Antoon Schoors' contributions to the Book of Qoheleth and particularly to its language have been and continue to be of invaluable worth and importance for all subsequent research.<sup>1</sup> In view of his substantial and comprehensive study of all philological problems of the Book of Qoheleth it seems impossible to find out something which he has not already seen and discussed. Thus, the following remarks will not deal with philological questions strictly speaking but with a problem of the Book of Qoheleth that touches questions of its language as well as exegetical questions: the problem of ambiguities in certain words, sentences or passages. These ambiguities have led to rather contrary understandings of the whole book and of its fictitious author. Is Qoheleth a pessimist, an optimist or a realist? Is his book an expression of skepticism, of piety or of a feeling of absurdity? Probably none of these and other general labels really square with the book. But the variety of the labels which have been proposed for the Book of Qoheleth in the history of its interpretation indicates that it is not always clear at the first sight what a certain passage of the book means.

To some extent it is due to the fact that every interpretation is the result of an interaction between the text and its readers. As is well-known, an optimist says the glass is half filled whereas a pessimist says it is half empty. But there seem to be also instances in the Book of Qoheleth where sentences or passages are ambiguous with regard to their semantics, their syntax or their pragmatics quite irrespective of the judgment of different readers. I will now turn to

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<sup>1</sup> Particularly A. SCHOORS, *The Preacher Sought to Find Pleasing Words, A Study of the Language of Qohelethh, Part I: Grammar* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 41), Leuven, 1992, *Part II: Vocabulary* (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analecta 143), Leuven, 2004.

discuss three examples of ambiguities of such a kind in the Book of Qoheleth. Afterwards I will try to substantiate the conclusion that these ambiguities are intended and meaningful and develop some conjectures about their meaning.<sup>2</sup>

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# I. Qoheleth 5:7–8

In Qoh 5:7–8 we read:

אם עשק רש וגזל משפט וצדק תראה במדינה  
אל תתמה עליהם  
כי גבה מעל גבה שמר  
וגבהים עליהם  
ויתרין ארץ בכל היא (Qere: הוא) מלך לשדה נעבד

Obviously, these sentences formulate an admonition (אל תתמה) that should be observed under certain circumstances which are named in a conditional clause (introduced with אם). The reasons given for this admonition are stated in a couple of sentences which are introduced with כי. The conditional clause at the beginning of this short passage is quite clear. It can be translated roughly as follows: "When you see how the poor are oppressed in the province, and law and justice are denied ..." The meaning of the subsequent admonition depends on the interpretation of the verb תתמה.

According to the *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon* of Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner (HAL)<sup>3</sup> the verb תתמה qal can be used either meaning "to be astonished, be amazed" or meaning "to freeze with fear, be horrified". An example for the first usage (which HAL assumes in Qoh 5:7) is Sir 11:12–13. There it is stated – following the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible (NRSV) – that there are people "who are slow and need help, who lack strength and abound in poverty; but the eyes of the Lord look kindly upon them; he lifts them out of their lowly condition and raises up their heads to the amazement of the many". More literally, the last sentence could be translated "and many people are (or: will be, or: were?) astonished (or:

<sup>2</sup> For a more detailed documentation and discussion of the relevant secondary literature see TH. KRÜGER, *Qoheleth* (Hermeneia), Minneapolis, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> W. BAUMGARTNER, J. J. STAMM & B. HARTMANN (eds.), *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Lexikon zum Alten Testament* von L. Koehler & W. Baumgartner, Dritte Auflage, 2 vols., Leiden, 1995. Cp. SCHOORS, *The Preacher* (II), p. 421.

surprised) at him" (ויתמהו עליו רבים). An example for the second usage of the verb תמה qal ("to freeze with fear, be horrified") is Ps 48:6. When the hostile kings, who assembled and came together against Jerusalem, saw the city, "they were horrified (תמהו); they were in panic, they took to flight".<sup>4</sup> In view of this range of meaning of the verb תמה qal there seem to be two possible translations of the Hebrew phrase אל תתמה עליהם in Qoh 5:7, namely "do not be frightened of this" or "do not be surprised at this".

Before we can discuss the meaning of these respective translations we must at first consider the ensuing substantiating clauses. Here it is the participle שמר which gives the first sentence a certain ambiguity.<sup>5</sup> Of the meanings which HAL suggests for the verb שמר qal, "to keep, watch over" or "to take care of, preserve, protect" seem to fit best into the present context. The Hebrew sentence שמר גבה מעל גבה can thus be understood in the sense that "a higher (official) watches over a high one", either to condition his actions and to keep him from doing something wrong, or to protect him from being criticized because of his misdeeds or failures.

Thus we have in Qoh 5:7 an ambiguous admonition together with an equally ambiguous substantiation. Combining these ambiguities we come to two possible interpretations of the whole verse which appear to make sense. First, the verse may be read as an attempt to calm down fears of (or protests against) apparent shortcomings of the government that lead to oppression and injustice: "When you see how the poor are oppressed in the province, and law and justice are denied, do not be frightened about this. For a higher (official) controls a high one, and over them are (even) higher ones." Thus the mistakes of a high official that may lead to temporary grievances will soon be corrected by a higher official who is in charge of him. However, there is also a second possible interpretation of this verse which turns the first reading upside down: "When you see how the poor are oppressed in the province, and law and justice are denied, do not be surprised about this. For a higher (official) protects a high one, and over them are (even) higher ones." This would mean that the shortcomings of the government are no mistakes that can be eliminated within the system. Rather, it is this system of government which produces the very grievances that it claims to eliminate. Instead of controlling each other the authorities protect each other for their own profit. So it is no wonder that this system of government leads to oppression and injustice.

<sup>4</sup> NRSV translates תמהו here as "they were astounded", but the translation "they were horrified", proposed by HAL, seems to fit better into the context.

<sup>5</sup> Cp. SCHOORS, *The Preacher* (II), p. 297–8.

How does the continuation in verse 8 fit to these two possible readings of verse 7? At first glance verse 8 seems to confirm the first reading of verse 7 as an apology of the government for sporadic grievances: "In all this (reading *בְּכָל הָאֵץ* instead of *בְּכָל הָאֵץ*) it is an advantage for a land, when there is a king for a plowed field." That is, at the top of the

<p. 66> hierarchy of officials the king ensures that all shortcomings of the government will finally be corrected in the interest of a flourishing agriculture. However, this understanding of verse 8 is far from certain. Robert Gordis was not the only commentator who thought that this verse is impenetrable obscure.<sup>6</sup> Choon-Leong Seow in his recent commentary states: "The whole verse as it stands is problematic because of the awkwardness of its syntax, its apparent lack of internal coherence, and the difficulty of relating it to the preceeding and following units of thought. Perhaps it is hopelessly corrupt. MT, although substantially supported by the ancient versions, makes no sense."<sup>7</sup> Less pessimistic was Antoon Schoors in the first volume of his *Studies of the Language of Qoheleth*. He called Qoh 5:8 "a famous *crux* in the exegesis of Qoh." But he continued: "Although it is hard to know what the verse really intends to say, its syntactical structure seems clear: it is a nominal clause, *מֶלֶךְ לְשָׂדֶה נֶעְבֵּר* being the predicate and *הָאֵץ* the subject. The personal pronoun *הוּא*, *הוּא*, functions as copula or anaphoric pronoun."<sup>8</sup> I would prefer to read *בְּכָל* instead of *בְּכָל* and to understand *הָאֵץ* as pointing back to verse 7 ("all this"). But this does not change the syntactical structure of the verse which Schoors has clearly described.

But what does *מֶלֶךְ לְשָׂדֶה נֶעְבֵּר* mean? Since the niph'al of the verb *עָבַד* in the Hebrew Bible always means "to be tilled" or "cultivated" with reference to a land or a field,<sup>9</sup> it seems probable that *שָׂדֶה נֶעְבֵּר* means "a cultivated field", either in the general sense of "the cultivated field", i. e., "all cultivated fields", or in the particular sense of "a (one single) cultivated field". Depending on the general or particular understanding of *שָׂדֶה נֶעְבֵּר* the whole phrase *מֶלֶךְ לְשָׂדֶה נֶעְבֵּר* can be interpreted in two different ways. It can mean "a king for the plowed field", that is, "one king for all plowed fields", or "a king for a plowed field", that is, "one king for every plowed field".

The first understanding of verse 8 can be paraphrased as follows: "It is an advantage for a land in all this, when there is a king for the plowed field (i.e.: when all plowed fields have one king)." The second interpretation reads verse 8 in the following sense: "It is an advantage for a

<sup>6</sup> R. GORDIS, *Koheleth, The Man and His World, A Study of Ecclesiastes* (Texts and Studies of the Jewish Theological Seminary of America 19), New York, 1968 (3d ed.), *ad loc.*

<sup>7</sup> C. L. SEOW, *Ecclesiastes, A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (The Anchor Bible 18C), New York, 1997, *ad loc.*

<sup>8</sup> SCHOORS, *The Preacher* (I), p. 34, cp. *The Preacher* (II), p. 5–6.

<sup>9</sup> Cp. SCHOORS, *The Preacher* (II), p. 316.

land in all this, when there is a king for a plowed field (i.e.: when every plowed field has its own king)." Whereas the first interpretation of verse

<p. 67> 8 fits well to the understanding of verse 7 as an apology of the system of hierarchic government, the second understanding of verse 8 continues a reading of verse 7 as a thorough critique of this system of government: Because it leads only to oppression and injustice, it would be better if every one who plows his field would be his own king. Thus, in Qoh 5:7–8 we have not only a couple of ambiguous words or phrases but a whole text unit which can be read and understood in two different, and rather contradicting, ways. This is not a singular phenomenon in the Book of Qoheleth as the following examples will show.

## II. Qoheleth 8:1–9

My second example of ambiguities in the Book of Qoheleth is Qoh 8:1–9. For the sake of brevity I will pass over verse 1, mentioning only that it gives a hint that the following should be read and considered carefully: "Who is like the wise man, and who knows to interpret a word?" I will also not enter into the details of the text critical discussion of the beginning of verse 2, where אֵי seems to be a mistaken reading of an original אֵל which the Septuagint and the Peshitta presuppose. The first half of verse 2 may then be translated as follows: "Obey the command of a king!"

The composed preposition על דברת can be used in the sense of "because of" or in the sense of "concerning", as Antoon Schoors stated, following C.F. Whitley.<sup>10</sup> שְׁבוּעַת אֱלֹהִים may be an oath which god has sworn or an oath which the reader has sworn by god – for example, an oath of loyalty to the king.<sup>11</sup> Finally, the verb בָּהַל niph'al in verse 3 can mean "to be horrified" or "to make haste".<sup>12</sup> Taking the various possible understandings of these words and phrases into consideration, verses 2–3a can be interpreted essentially in three ways. First, verses 2–3a can be read as a religiously based exhortation to render obedience to a king: "Obey the command of a king, and because of the oath of god (that god has sworn to the king or that you have sworn to the

<sup>10</sup> SCHOORS, *The Preacher* (I), p. 123, cp. C. F. WHITLEY, *Koheleth, His Language and Thought* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 148), Berlin, 1979, p. 36.

<sup>11</sup> Cp. SCHOORS, *The Preacher* (II), p. 110 & 352.

<sup>12</sup> Cp. SCHOORS, *The Preacher* (II), p. 249–50.

king by god) do not hasten to go away from him, do not get involved in something bad." Second, verses 2–3a can be interpreted as an exhortation to render obedi-

<p. 68> ence to a king – even when he demands an oath: "Obey the command of a king, and (even) concerning an oath by god (or: the gods – which he demands from you): do not hasten to go away from him, do not get involved in something bad." Third, verses 2–3a can be understood as an exhortation to render obedience to a king – except when he demands an oath: "Obey the command of a king, but concerning an oath by god (or: the gods – which he demands from you): do not be frightened, go away from him, do not get involved in something bad (or: do not stay with something bad)."

The semantic ambiguity of this admonition is in contradiction to its pragmatic function: the text gives its readers an instruction how to behave vis-a-vis a king, but it does not make clear to its readers how they are supposed to behave. Thus, the text looks like a caricature of the opportunism of a courtly wisdom: the wise man sees himself as the sovereign master of the situation (cp. verse 1) and yet is only the king's plaything and the object of his moods. The wise man believes (or professes) that he can remain true to certain principles (especially regarding his religion), yet these principles are by no means clear and can be flexibly interpreted in terms of opportunity. If the "oath of god" is related to the oath of allegiance to a ruler, a refusal of this oath could be motivated both politically and religiously, the latter especially if the oath was to be sworn by the gods of a foreign ruler. It is noteworthy that the ambiguity of the text arises exactly with the question how human and divine power are interrelated.

This question is taken up in the following text. Verses 3b–4 speak about the power of the king: "... for he can do anything he wants to, for the word of a king has power, and who could say to him: What are you doing?" This statement about the power of the king and his word seems to corroborate the first or the second understanding of verses 2–3a as an advice to obey a king in every respect. The same is true of the statement about the ability of the wise man in verse 5: "Whoever obeys the command (probably: the command of a king, cp. verse 2<sup>13</sup>) will meet no harm, and the heart of a wise man knows time and judgment", that is, probably, "the proper time and manner of procedure" (following the interpretation of Robert Gordis<sup>14</sup>). Through his obedience to the king the wise man remains protected from harm, but through his knowledge of the right time he can also attain his own goals. However, verses 3b–4

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<sup>13</sup> Cp. SCHOORS, *The Preacher* (II), p. 362–3.

<sup>14</sup> GORDIS, *Koheleth*, *ad loc.*

<p. 69> and verse 5 together formulate a substantiation of a courtly opportunism that contradicts itself. For verses 3b–4 state that the power of the king is so great that the wise man can only obey him in every respect, but verse 5 attributes the wise man the power of attaining his own goals despite the power of the king. In view of this contradiction one may ponder if the "command" (מצוה) of which verse 5 is speaking may also be understood as a "command" or "commandment" of god, and if "time and judgment" (עת ומשפט) may be used in the sense of divine judgment that makes an end to evil deeds and conditions. Then, verse 5 would not substantiate a limitless obedience to the ruling king, but an obedience that ends when the realm of religious affairs is touched.

However, what follows in verses 6–8 casts serious doubts on the whole preceding discourse. These verses take up keywords from verses 4–5 in almost the exact reverse order:

6 For every matter there is time and judgment (עת ומשפט – cp. verse 5),  
for the evil (רעה – cp. verse 5) of a man weighs heavy on him.  
7 He does not know (ידע – cp. verse 5) what will happen,  
for who could inform him (מי יגיד לו – cp. verse 4) of what will be?  
8 No man has power (שליט – cp. verse 4) over the wind, so that he could stop the wind,  
and no man has power (שליטין – cp. verse 4) over the day of death.  
And in war there is no discharge,  
and injustice will not save him who does it.

Speaking no longer about a king and a wise man, but only about man in general, verses 6–8 call into question what verses 1–5 said about the power of the king and the abilities of the wise man. Even the power of a king is limited, and even a wise man cannot escape evil and harm and cannot foresee the future. This calls into question the whole opportunistic attitude that was expressed in the preceding part of the text. The admonitions to be cautious in one's dealings with a king are thus by no means flatly negated. But they are mitigated by the awareness that life confronts humans with more unpredictable dangers than those of a king's court, and that even a king being a human being is not as dangerous as he might seem to be at first sight.

Verse 9 takes up the keyword שליט "to have power" from the preceding discussion and can be understood as a final statement. With the majority of commentators, Antoon Schoors favoured



an understanding of the final phrase *עַתָּה אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַט הָאָדָם בָּאָדָם לְרָעָה לוֹ* as an accusative of time.<sup>15</sup>

Verse 9, then, could be translated as follows: "All this I saw, and I gave

<p. 70> attention to everything that was done under the sun, at a time when one man had power over another to his detriment." If this understanding is correct, verse 9 introduces a new turn into the preceding train of thought. At times, when the government is bad, it is advisable to be cautious in one's dealings with a king, but at the same time one should not expect any profit from one's being loyal to the king. When the government is bad, it would probably be the best thing to keep as much distance as possible to a king and his officials. These conclusions would partly concur with the advices in verses 2–5, but also partly contradict them. The same would be true if one understood the concluding phrase of verse 9 as an independent clause of existence: "There is (or: was) a time, when one man had power over another to his detriment." This is how the Vulgata interprets this phrase: "interdum dominatur homo homini in malum suum" (i. e., "sometimes a man rules over a man to his detriment"). This interpretation of verse 9 accords with the first one in the statement that human power and dominion are not always good.

However, there seems to be a third possible understanding of the syntax of verse 9 that leads to a more general and fundamental critique of human power and dominion. For the phrase *אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַט הָאָדָם בָּאָדָם לְרָעָה לוֹ* may also be interpreted as a nominal clause with *אֲשֶׁר שָׁלַט הָאָדָם בָּאָדָם* as subject and *לְרָעָה לוֹ* as predicate. Then, its translation would be: "A time when one man had power over another has (always) been detrimental for him." That is, human power and dominion over other humans are always bad. This anarchistic conclusion would fit to the understanding of Qoh 5:8 in the sense that it would be the best for a land if everyone would be his own king – and to the strong line of tradition in the Hebrew Bible that is very critical about human kingship and government and favors the government of god instead, like Psalm 9:19 which prays to god: "do not let mortals prevail".

### III. Qoheleth 10:20

A third and last – and comparatively short – example of ambiguities in the Book of Qoheleth is the verse Qoh 10:20: "Even in your thoughts do not curse a king; even in your bedroom do not curse a rich one! For the birds of the sky could carry away the sound, and what

<sup>15</sup> SCHOORS, *The Preacher* (I), p. 189.

has wings could betray the saying." Here, the ambiguity does not accrue from words or syntactical constructions which could be interpreted in more than one way. Rather, what the text says does not agree with what its

<p. 71> readers know about reality. I don't mean here the difference between the speaking birds of the text and the birds we know from our experience which mostly are not able to speak. It is reasonable to assume that a contemporary reader easily understood the last two sentences of our verse as metaphorical statements. They point to the fact that it is difficult to keep something confidential after one has spoken about it to another person.

In the Aramaic Proverbs of Ahiqar line 10:4 similarly warns its readers:

"Above all watchfulness, watch your mouth,  
and against him who [is listening] harden (your) heart;  
for a word is a bird  
and one who releases it is without sens[e]".<sup>16</sup>

Considering this insight, it seems reasonable to be discreet and extremely cautious with one's words – the more so if the "birds" that could betray what one has said might be formal or informal cooperators of the secret service or other kinds of denunciators. However, even in a society or under a government that keeps its members under close surveillance and does not grant them any freedom of speech, it seems a little exaggerated to interdict oneself not only from *saying* anything critical of mighty or rich people, but also from *thinking* something like that.

Thus, the question comes up whether one should regard this text as a serious advice or as a caricature of an overanxious self-censorship. The text itself seems to be ambiguous in this regard. However, the immediately preceding verses Qoh 10:16–19 demonstrate the freedom not only to think but also to speak (or at least write) statements that are critical of kings and princes. This is a clear hint that the warning of verse 20 is not to be taken at face value but as an ironic advice that wants to provoke readers to think and to act exactly the opposite way.

#### IV. Conclusion

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<sup>16</sup> Translation after SEOW, *Ecclesiastes*, p. 334.

Looking back to the three passages just discussed, let us now turn to some final considerations. There are several reasons that make it plausible to assume that the ambiguities we have seen did not come about by accident, but are intended and meaningful. First, the ambiguities do not relate to single words, phrases or sentences only, but to whole passages

<p. 72> which can be understood and interpreted in more than one way. Second, the ambiguities do not result in a great variety of possible interpretations that are more or less arbitrary, but precisely in two oppositional attitudes towards power and authority: on the one hand an attitude of affirmation, fear, and opportunism towards power and authority, and on the other hand an attitude of criticism, distance, and even a kind of anarchism (or maybe theocratism). There are sometimes further differences within these positions, but the main opposition is always clear and predominant. Third, the texts do not leave the ambiguities open, but they seem to guide the readers from an affirmation of power and authority to a more critical view. At first sight the texts suggest an understanding in terms of a call to subordinate oneself to the existing government without resistance. However, at the same time they give their readers more or less subtle hints for a second reading that results in a reflection and revision of their first understanding and lead them to a more critical and distanced attitude towards the existing powers and authorities.

Thus, at least a considerable amount of the ambiguities in the Book of Qoheleth seem to be the consequence of a deliberate strategy of guiding the readers in the process of reading and interpreting the texts. This assumption fits better to the data of the text than other hypotheses that are often brought forward to explain the ambiguities and contradictions in the Book of Qoheleth.

A first hypothesis that has been revived in recent years by scholars as Martin Rose or Renate Brandscheidt<sup>17</sup> tries to explain the ambiguities and contradictions in the Book of Qoheleth as a result of its process of literary growth in several distinct stages. When editors or redactors added their own thoughts to the texts which they read, they created ambiguous and sometimes even contradictory passages. However, in the examples which we have discussed above, it is impossible to eliminate the ambiguity of the text by eliminating parts of it as later additions. Rather, whole and integral passages are ambiguous and seem to be formulated with this intention from the outset.

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<sup>17</sup> M. ROSE, *Rien de nouveau, Nouvelles approches du livre de Qohélet* (Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis 168), Fribourg & Göttingen, 1999. R. BRANDSCHEIDT, *Weltbegeisterung und Offenbarungsglaube, Literar-, form- und traditionsgehistorische Untersuchung zum Buch Kohelet* (Trierer Theologische Studien 64), Trier, 1999.

A second hypothesis tries to explain the ambiguities and contradictions as the very aim of the Book of Qoheleth. Thus, according to James Loader,<sup>18</sup> these ambiguities and contradictions result in a tension that on

<p. 73> the "theoretical" level is consciously maintained with the repeated *hebel*-statements, while in the repeated exhortations to pleasure and enjoyment, the possibility of overcoming this tension in a "practical" way is demonstrated. However, in the passages discussed above the two oppositional attitudes towards power and authority do not seem to be of equal value in view of the texts, which rather advocate a more critical perspective.

According to a third approach ambiguities and contradictions in the Book of Qoheleth can be explained if one assumes that the book as a whole is a dialogue between two oppositional interlocutors, which for example Theodore Perry tried to reconstruct in his commentary, or that there are passages where Qoheleth quotes the opinion of different opponents and refutes them with his own words, as for example Diethelm Michel and Norbert Lohfink assume.<sup>19</sup> Of the passages discussed above, Qoh 8:1–9 would be the most suitable for this explanation, since here the admonitions and statements in the first half of the text are called into question and corrected in the second half. However, even in this passage there are no clear marks of a quotation, and the part of the text that could be interpreted as a quotation is already ambiguous and seems to be formulated already with a critical and ironical stance.

Therefore it seems to suggest itself to understand the ambiguities and contradictions in the Book of Qoheleth as part of a rhetorical strategy that stimulates the readers to try out different readings and interpretations and leaves it to them to find out which one fits best in the context of the book – and in the context of their own experiences.

If this is the case, what is the background and what are the intentions behind this rhetorical strategy? One possible explanation could be that the Book of Qoheleth was written at a time and under circumstances that advised caution with regard to the expression of one's opinions, especially if these opinions were critical of the ruling classes. Following Norbert Lohfink one could suggest that some passages in the Book of Qoheleth, particularly Qoh 10:16–20, may reflect the political situation in the Ptolemaic empire after Ptolemy V ascended the

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<sup>18</sup> J. A. LOADER, *Polar Structures in the Book of Qohelet* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 152), Berlin, 1979.

<sup>19</sup> TH. A. PERRY, *Dialogues with Kohelet, The Book of Ecclesiastes, Translation and Commentary*, University Park, 1993. D. MICHEL, *Untersuchungen zur Eigenart des Buches Qohelet* (BZAW 183), Berlin, 1989. N. LOHFINK, *Qoheleth* (Continental Commentaries), Minneapolis, 2003.

throne in 205 B.C.E. at five years of age. His guardian Agathocles and the latter's sister Agathoclea created an uproar by their mismanagement and debauchery and made use of intelligence services and denunciations to control their

<p. 74> subjects.<sup>20</sup> This situation may have contributed to the development of a rhetorical strategy that does not always make explicit what the author thinks. However, I think a more important motive for this rhetorical strategy may lie in the aim of the book to convey to its readers a critical look at common opinions and to encourage them to think independently. The ambiguities we have seen in our three examples are only one out of a couple of indications that point in this direction.

Another hint, exposed already by Michael Fox, lies in the framework of the Book of Qoheleth, its superscription and its epilogue vis-à-vis its corpus.<sup>21</sup> Not only does the framework put into perspective what is said in the corpus, but also within the framework the epilogue which presents Qoheleth as a wise man puts into perspective the prologue which presents Qoheleth as a king. Within the corpus one frequently finds reflections that start with a certain experience, opinion or conviction and then proceed to a critical reflection and revision which results in a refutation or modification of the starting point. Thus, each statement in the book is put into perspective by its literary and rhetorical contexts. The same is true, at least in my view, of the whole royal travesty in chapters 1:12–2:26. It results in a hate of life and a devaluation of pleasure and enjoyment that are answered in the fresh reflections – developed free from the attitude of a king – in chapters 3–12, and thus again are critically put into perspective.

In this way the Book of Qoheleth trains its readers not to take anything which they read at face value, but to examine everything carefully and critically in the light of former insights and of their own experiences, and thus to form an opinion of their own. The aim of the Book of Qoheleth is probably not to persuade its readers into thinking and acting in a certain way, but to enable them to see through and to scrutinize current opinions and to find out by themselves what is right. For, even though there are obvious limits of human knowledge and understanding, nevertheless "the wise have eyes in their head, but fools walk in darkness" (Qoh 2:14) – even if sometimes it may be more fun to be a fool than to be wise (at least for a fool).

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<sup>20</sup> LOHFINK, *Qoheleth, ad loc.* (Qoh 10:16–20).

<sup>21</sup> M. V. FOX, *Frame Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qoheleth*, in: *Hebrew Union College Annual* 48 (1977), p. 83–106.